

Developing Communities of Practice: The role of a Centre for Excellence in fostering staff communities

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Theme: Innovation

The CPLA strategy places emphasis on three strategic development activities, each of which involves groups of staff working together in areas of common interest. These initiatives, managed by a central team, are designed to impact upon a significant number of staff and a substantial number of students. The approach adopted to achieve strategic goals can differ quite considerably across modules, faculties and the institution on the whole.

Faculty Projects (FPs)

With the CPLA's support, each of the University's four faculties is pursuing a large scale, strategic initiative to embed learner autonomy in the context of their Faculty. The faculties have been given considerable autonomy over how to execute their plan over a period of two and a half years, and have established a management team to lead the initiative.

Small Scale Projects (SSPs)

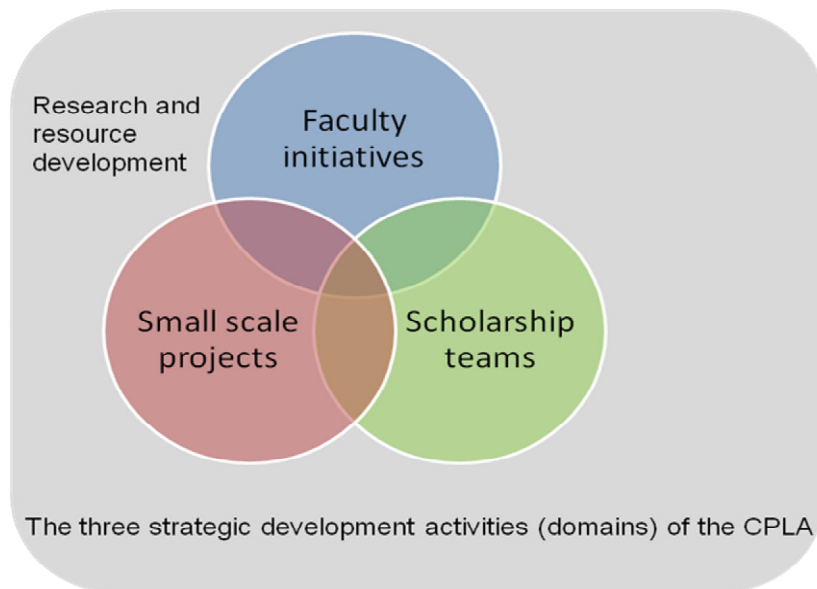
SSPs are one-year, CPLA-funded innovation projects, that develop practices around learner autonomy in the context of a single module. Staff received funding and support for a project which they defined, and suitable applications were approved by a central team. In 2008-2009 we supported 24 projects and in the coming year we will be supporting an additional 21 projects. The support has included, in addition to funding: workshops and action learning sets, poster exhibitions, at-elbow support and assistance with project evaluation.

Scholarship Teams for Autonomy Research (STARs)

The STARs scheme is designed to help the University to develop a better understanding of learner autonomy through scholarly activities around specific themes that relate to learner autonomy. Staff submitted an expression of interest in a theme, and are supported through workshops and action learning events.

Research and Resource Development

The CPLA Core Team, which consists of the director, two researchers, associate directors from each faculty, as well as two student interns, functions as a central team to support all other activities and projects. In addition, they seek to produce a range of resources to support development of learner autonomy within the institution.



The emergence of Communities of Practice as a result of the work of CPLA

Project staff work in teams to develop practices that are their own response to the strategic goals of the CPLA. Although activities are streamlined centrally to conform to the strategy, it is the staff that conceive and implement practices that embed learner autonomy in various modules and across the faculties. In this sense, emerging communities of practice are 'fundamentally self-organising systems' (Wenger 1998).

In a wider context, communities of practice (CoPs) have been defined in relation to the social interaction between members, and their shared interest. Wenger, for example, defines CoPs as

"groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." (Wenger 2002; 2009: 1)

Wesley and Buysse, define CoP as a 'learning community', which

"emerges from a common desire among its members to achieve change (i.e. improve existing practices); it provides regular opportunities for collaborative reflection and inquiry through dialogue; and ultimately, it develops common tools, language, images, roles, assumptions, understandings, and a shared world view." (Wesley & Buysse, 2001: 118)

Bood and Coenders refer to CoPs as:

"groups of people who share their knowledge and experience of a certain theme or professional field and learn together in order to better cope with problems and challenges in practice. People form CoPs for different reasons, but almost always they wish to improve their functioning in practice" (2004: 9, quoted in Cremers and Valkenburg, 2008).

According to Wenger's model, CoPs develop through their engagement in a variety of activities: (Adapted from Wenger (2002; 2009))

Requests for information

Seeking experience

Coordination and synergy

Discussion of developments

Documentation of projects
Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps
Reusing assets
Problem solving

Wenger et.al (2002) point out that CoPs differ from *project teams* in that CoPs focus on "the members' personal investment in its domain, not in a set of tasks" (quoted in Cremers and Valkenburg, 2008: 335). One of the key differences between CoPs and projects teams is therefore this sense of personal investment and willingness to share practice, as well as to learn from others. Thus, although many CPLA activities are envisaged as projects in a sense that they are supported by the central team for a period of time, this social interaction in creating and sharing knowledge has been at the heart of what CPLA has endeavoured to achieve, and for this reason CoPs in the context of CPLA can perhaps be best defined as communities of those interested and active "in empowering students to acquire responsibility for their learning; to work in partnerships with tutors and other students" (original CPLA bid, 2004), and to work together in sharing knowledge and good practice towards common goals and interests. In all CPLA initiatives, the domain of interest, community and practice focus on learner autonomy, yet they all have different functions.

In the context of the CPLA strategy, communities of practice have grown from the premise of facilitating a community (or rather, a number of communities) where all members are viewed as learners who are 'co-producers of knowledge' (Wesley & Buysse, 2001: 118). Essentially these communities of practice cut across several departments and faculties, each with their own remit and approach to learner autonomy. Potentially CPLA functions as an 'umbrella' for the number of CoPs that have a shared domain of interest (learner autonomy). The main responsibility is to coordinate project teams through the development of a strategic perspective of learner autonomy that transcends the fragmentation of individually managed projects (i.e. perceptions and goals around learner autonomy). . One of the core objectives of CPLA has been to encourage staff to engage with each other within and across the boundaries of the different initiatives (the domains). Although some staff have responded positively and engaged in a number of different ways, not all staff, particularly the scholarship teams, have been involved in a community of practice.

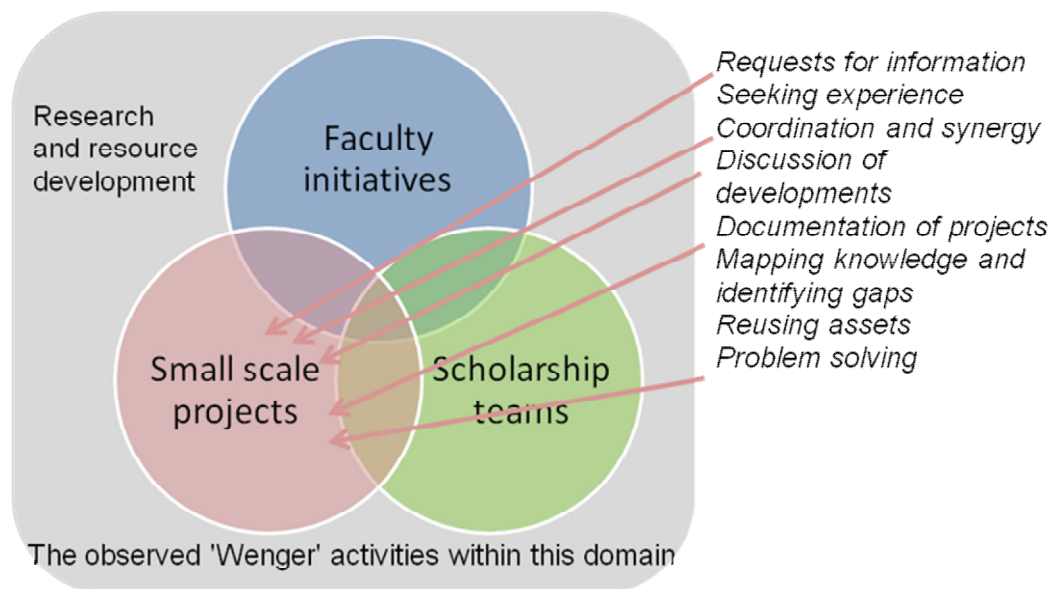
Characteristics of emerging CoPs

Staff communities of practice are informally bound by their domain of interest (learner autonomy) and what they have learnt through their mutual engagement in CPLA events and activities. According to Wenger (1998: 2) communities of practice tend to define itself along three dimensions, from which characteristics of CoPs are drawn in relation to CPLA initiatives:

- A joint enterprise as understood and continually negotiated by its members: a great deal of enthusiasm to engage with principles of active, student centred teaching and learning practices that enhance autonomy (albeit the idea or definition of autonomy may fluctuate depending on the context and discipline);
- Mutual engagement that binds members together in a social entity: overlapping boundaries of 'membership' within various domains, which complement each other because of shared goals and interests (e.g. FP participants may collaborate with SSP participants; STAR scholars may be heavily involved in FPs/SSPs). Members who cross boundaries may benefit from exposure to different approaches to learning and teaching in other subjects groups or disciplines;
- A shared understanding that members develop over time: the shared domain of interest remains the same: learner autonomy, enhancing the student learning

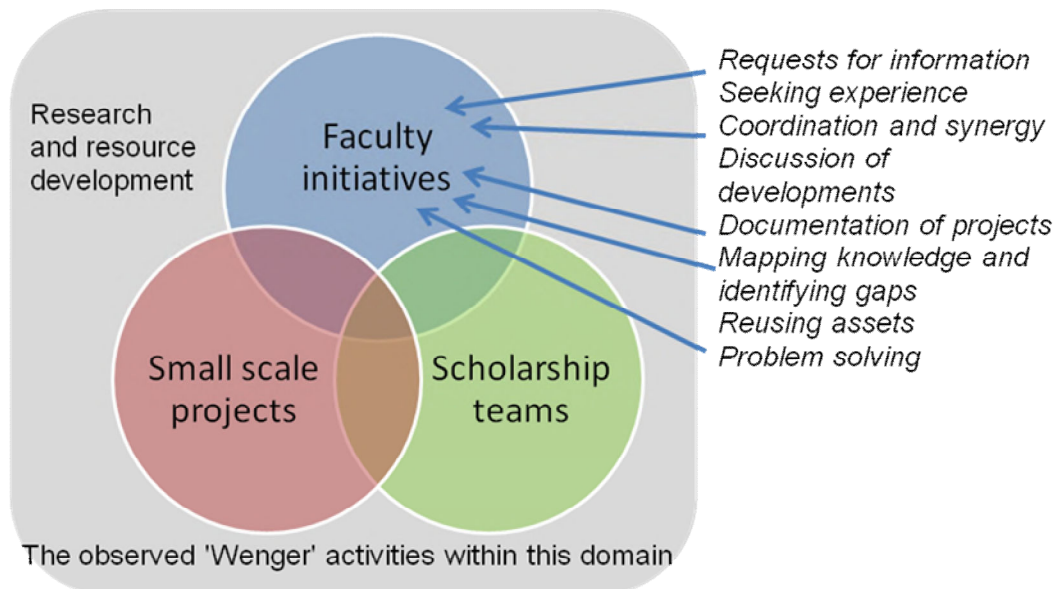
experience through actively engaging with students and encouraging them to take responsibility of their own learning.

Small Scale Project leaders are supported through a range of methods as previously outlined. It has, been interesting to observe how staff have engaged with the support programme. Participants, for example, have divided into those who prefer to work more or less independently in that they simply choose to get on with their projects, with minimal contact with the CETL, and those who have embraced the opportunity to learn from colleagues in workshops and in meetings outside the workshops. This shows that while CPLA supports a network of projects, it is also providing an opportunity for communities to develop, albeit not all members of the network wish to be part of a community. Those who simply wish to remain as members of a 'network' are typically supported by the CPLA Core Team. However, participants who actively engage with the core team and other projects become members of a community of practitioners who have a very clear idea of what they want to do and learn, and see the community as a forum for sharing practice and solving problems. In many cases, the projects have involved small development teams, which transformed into communities as the practitioners have developed course and tutorial materials collaboratively, and have reflected on how to develop the course, either in terms of delivery or assessment. One example of such is a module titled 'Making Media' where staff from the faculty and support departments worked together to facilitate the learning and assessment of Communication Studies students who were asked to develop promotional tools for peer 'clients' in other subjects.

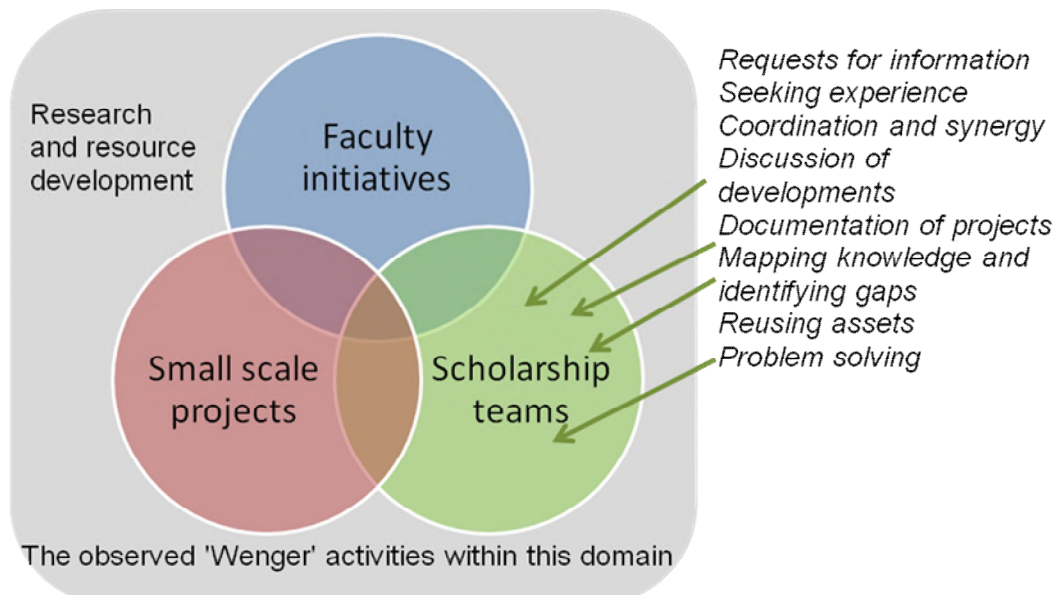


Faculty initiatives are led by a project leader and are tailored to meet the needs of the individual faculty, while the shared domain of interest remains on learner autonomy, or practices that enhance autonomy such as EBL. Yet it is telling that not all Faculty Projects are emerging as communities of practice, even when many of their activities fall within the categories that Wenger defines as what CoPs typically 'do' (see page 3). For example, although two of the faculties are focusing on developing Enquiry Based Learning environments, they have approached their initiatives in very different ways. One faculty has used the funding to address particular issues that have been identified as barriers to enhancing student centred learning and autonomy. This is carried out through distributed projects aimed at 'trouble-shooting' or piloting approaches across a range of modules and programmes. Another faculty has taken a different approach in engaging staff to scope best practice and as a result has decided to proactively facilitate the creation of a community of

practice to act as a resource and locally-situated forum to enhance teaching and learning practices that promote learner autonomy. The evaluation feedback from the project leaders reflects this differing focus, the former approaching their own role as a 'manager', and the latter more as a 'facilitator'.



The **Scholarship Teams** have not yet developed into a CoP, presumably because participation in the project is voluntary and carries no particular incentive such as buy-out time. What has characterised the team is there is no actual agreement on the shared domain of interest (i.e. the members' definitions of learner autonomy differ quite considerably) and the most active members work on the project because it is in line with other projects or research interests currently pursued. This clearly highlights the importance of aligning members' personal interests and perceived benefits with those of the CoP.



Staff learning communities

Through these three strategic domains, interdisciplinary staff communities of practice are being fostered. While the innovative teaching and learning practices arise from the individual

or groups of staff working on a particular project, CPLA fosters and facilitates connections made between projects within a domain to allow practitioners to learn from each other. This is particularly evident in the case of SSPs where staff are encouraged to learn from each other in workshops. CPLA also fosters connections between domains through dissemination activities and exhibitions. It is in this *connecting* activity within and between domains that the role of CPLA as a facilitator of learner autonomy-focused CoPs become significant. In particular, CPLA emerges as a central forum for encouraging and sharing good practice and for showcasing and sharing existing and emerging pockets of excellence across the institution.

Wenger (1998) proposed a community of practice "exists because it produces a shared practice as members engage in a collective process of learning". In the context of CPLA initiatives, this interactive nature is significant because while the funding provided centrally gives some direction in relation to the scope of these projects, individual members (or teams) within the emerging CoPs are equally influencing the direction of the strategy as a whole. For example, as these communities of practice 'engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information' (Wenger, 2002; 2009: 2), CPLA provides a framework within which CoPs can develop organically through regular workshops, symposia, structured and informal meetings. The CPLA strategy is, to an extent, organic in that it aims to respond to the needs of its members as well as the CoPs that it fosters.

Concluding remarks and lessons learnt

On reflection, it appears CPLA project staff work in cross-functional teams that form communities of practice which have created a shared understanding of learner autonomy, albeit within respective subjects or disciplines. These communities have facilitated learning through social interaction and action learning. CoPs have enabled members to learn fast and to learn complicated tasks effectively. Our findings concur with Cremer and Valkenburg (2008: 345) in that 'working as a CoP increases the level of knowledge of the participants and the quality of their working practice'.

The emerging communities are 'non-hierarchical' and 'informal'. The group (community) interests are closely aligned with personal interests (pre-existing work) and the shared domain of interest (enquiry) is clearly defined and shared between participants.

Concerns for development

- Not all domains are emerging as communities of practice
- Not everyone in a domain joins the community
- Attitudes seem to be based on previous experience(s)
- To develop communities:
 - How can we change these attitudes?
 - How do we break down hierarchies and maintain informality whilst also providing leadership and focus?

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